

Tanning remains popular with teens despite efforts to limit it

By Ashley Studley/Daily News staff

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Amanda Parrella has the dress. She has the date. Now, all Parrella says she needs for the Franklin High School junior prom is the tan.

As teens across the state flock to indoor tanning salons to prep for their big nights, the House of Representatives will start reviewing a bill passed by the Senate Thursday that raises the minimum tanning age from 14 to 16.

"Research has shown teens who use (tanning beds) have an increased risk of skin cancer by 75 percent," said bill supporter Sen. Karen Spilka, D-Ashland. "... We have an obligation to do something to help raise awareness."

And while the state considers upping the age, the federal government plans to implement a 10 percent tanning tax this summer as part of President Barack Obama's health care reform package - a move some local salons say could hurt their already-strained business.

"The regulations are already there, and I think the tan tax is definitely going to hurt the industry - and the industry is already hurting," said Cindy Coupsonikas, owner of Always Golden Tanning in Framingham. "We're a very small (salon), with the economy and everything - I'm struggling like every other small business."

Deb Girard, Director of the Melanoma Foundation of New England, said a tax is necessary to protect people from harmful ultraviolet rays.

"We need to have some legislation to support this," Girard said. "It's a combination of legislation, tax and education to change the behavior."

The Concord-based organization has visited nearly 200 high schools and about a dozen colleges for its "skin is in" program to build awareness about the dangers of ultraviolet radiation, Girard said.

"We know the age range is 15-29 - (where) we're starting to see the largest increases in melanoma," she said. "Given that melanoma and skin cancer are becoming epidemics in this country, we started working three years ago on a teen program where we provide some awareness and education on the dangers of tanning to high school kids during prom season."

She said some classes that pledge not to tan are awarded money toward their prom.

"Our goal with this program is to help kids understand they don't need to be tan, and to help them understand the dangers that are created by going to tanning beds and burning, and being outside and burning," she said.

Coupsonikas said this is a busy time of year for her Nicholas Road salon, which sees about 60 to 70 clients a day - 30 percent of them teens tanning for Framingham High's junior cotillion and senior prom this month.

Though most of her clients are at least 16, Coupsonikas said teens of all ages will always find a way to get their sun.

"They're targeting the indoor tanning industry, but the sun is the natural element. They're going to go to the beach, lay out on their deck, or lay out in their yard," she said. "Banning (tanners) under 18 is kind of ridiculous. I mean, are you going to ban them from going to the beach?"

As the law mandates currently, anyone under the age of 18 must have a parent's permission to use a tanning salon. Those under 14 are not allowed to tan at all.

With the proposed reform, parents or guardians of tanners 16 and 17 would need to go to the salon to give their consent.

Liz Fermano, assistant manager of The Tanning Spa in Franklin, said business has not slowed down with all the talk of added regulations and a new tax.

"We have a good traffic flow of every age group, from (high school) sophomores up," Fermano said.

She said the Franklin Village Plaza salon offers different tanning packages for proms and that some teens are opting for a sunless spray tan.

"It's a fast, easy tan. They come in, and they get out," she said. "It's all natural and nothing to worry about. It's the safest bet."

Parrella, a junior at Franklin High, said she recently signed up at the Tanning Spa for her May 21 prom, tanning every other day for 12-minute sessions.

"For me personally, I think when I'm tanner it looks better," she said. She'll stop after prom, she said.

Tanning Spa saleswoman Caitlin Hurley doesn't think a tax will deter tanners.

"Did (a tax) hurt people smoking? No - I still have a friend who will buy cigarettes for \$8 a pack," Hurley said. "There will always be people who spend the money."

She said tanning is OK in moderation.

"Tanning is tanning. For all the people who flip out about it - it is what it is. It's like fast food - if you eat it a lot, it's not good for you," Hurley said. "People with fair skin have to be careful (tanning), and we do our job so we don't let them burn or tan excessively."

Dermatologist Louis Kuchnir, of Kuchnir Dermatology in Milford, said tanning should be completely off limits to kids under 18 to avoid any risk.

"It causes cancer, but not everybody who tans will get cancer - we don't know who will get it," Kuchnir said. "Other carcinogens may also be OK in moderation, but we should be protecting our children from those materials."

Kuchnir, who also serves as president of the Massachusetts Academy of Dermatology, said people should wear sunscreen when outdoors, as the sun's rays can burn the skin and lead to cancer.

"Sunshine is wonderful stuff. It can help regulate daily rhythms, help control our moods and many of life's best activities happen in the sun," he said. "But all those benefits are available along with good protection."

As for indoor tanning, Kuchnir said the spray tan does not cause cancer or attribute to premature aging, but either way, he doesn't think a bronzed complexion will be in style much longer.

"Before it was realized how unhealthy ultraviolet damage can be, we used to think of a tan as (being) attractive. What bothers dermatologists most about tanning salons is it sends the wrong message about what's healthy and what's attractive," he said. "Minors and adolescents who seek a tan should be reminded that their natural skin color is the healthiest, prettiest color for them."

Martin Cohn, associate director for the Massachusetts Academy of Dermatology, has been working on the tanning bill since 2005 and is confident the House will approve it.

"It's really an unnecessary risk. The scientific data alone is what you have to look at," Cohn said. "When the World Health Organization issues these warnings... they're saying indoor tanning is no different than arsenic poisoning - you know there's an issue we have to take into account."

State Sen. Richard Moore, D-Uxbridge, chairman of the Senate Health Care Financing Committee, said he supports the bill and hopes the House will do the same.

"We're hoping the bill will regulate the industry, especially now that it's going to be regulated by the federal government," Moore said. "We really believe it's not a healthy cosmetic - one that is dangerous to young people, especially if they overdo it."

Cohn agrees.

"In this day in age, we're taking great confidence in (that) we're at least saving Massachusetts youth under the age of 16," he said.

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